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FM AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
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INFO RUCNCAN/ALL CANADIAN POSTS COLLECTIVE

"C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 000394

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/18/2013
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CA](#)
SUBJECT: LIBERAL "BOUNCE" FROM BY-ELECTIONS, BUT NOT ENOUGH?

REF: A. TORONTO 074
[1](#)B. 07 OTTAWA 2308

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Liberal Party won three of the four federal by-elections on March 17, which will bring high profile politicians Bob Rae and Martha Hall Findlay to Parliament to bolster the Liberal "team." The Conservatives picked up a former Liberal seat in Saskatchewan, however. Low voter turn-out, while typical in by-elections, may also indicate that the Liberals' grassroots organization is not yet strong enough to support a possible spring federal election, despite the apparent enthusiasm of some Liberal leaders for another go at forming a government. Policy took a back-seat to personality in the by-elections, suggesting that the ethical issues the Liberals have been championing did not find great resonance with voters. End summary.

LIBERAL VICTORIES, MOSTLY

[1](#)2. (U) In the March 17 federal by-elections, the Liberal Party - as expected - retained control of three key urban ridings: Toronto Centre; Willowdale (Toronto); and Vancouver-Quadra. (Ref a described the Ontario election results, which will bring into Parliament two of Stephane Dion's former competitors in the December 2006 Liberal Party leadership race, Bob Rae and Martha Hall Findlay.) However, the Conservative candidate won the previously Liberal riding of Desneth-Missinippi-Churchill River in northern Saskatchewan, despite Dion's personal pick of aboriginal candidate Joan Beatty. Dion hailed the three wins as a "great day for Liberals" and celebrated the addition of Rae and Hall Findlay to his "dream team" of high-profile MPs.

[1](#)3. (U) In the wake of the four by-elections, current party standings in the House of Commons are:
-- Conservatives, 127;
-- Liberals, 97;
-- Bloc Quebecois, 48;
-- New Democratic Party (NDP), 30; and,
-- Independents, 4.

In addition, there remain two vacancies, for which the government must announce dates for by-elections by June 2008.

LOW TURNOUT

[1](#)4. (U) Voter turn-out was uniformly low, as is the norm for federal by-elections, running at only 27.9 percent in Toronto Centre, 24.4 percent in Willowdale, 33.9 percent in Vancouver-Quadra, and 25 percent in Desneth-Missinippi-Churchill River. Notably, Liberal victor in Vancouver-Quadra Joyce Murray carried only 36.1 percent of the vote (with the Conservative candidate almost neck and neck at 35.5 percent), unlike the 2006 election, in which the

Liberal victor in this riding had won 49.1 percent of the vote.

COMMENT

15. (C) The Liberals had been looking for a popular "bounce" from these by-elections, and Dion personally needed a solid win to put the Liberals' September 2007 by-election loss of the "safe" Montreal seat of Outremont behind him. Winning even only three of the seats is still a psychological boost, although it may also have demonstrated weaknesses in the Liberals' grassroots organization, which may still not be quite ready -- in terms of finances or personnel -- for a general election. Many within the Liberal caucus -- reportedly even including Dion as well as Deputy Leader Michael Ignatieff -- are still apparently chomping at the bit to force a spring election, and seem to be casting an eye on bringing a confidence vote on one of the allotted Opposition Days on March 31, April 1, or April 2, as soon as the Commons reconvenes.

16. (C) A March 13-16 Strategic Counsel poll would seem to provide little incentive to go to an early vote, however, reporting support for the Conservatives at 38 percent and for the Liberals at only 27 percent. Liberal enthusiasm for an early federal election probably stems more from discomfort with the current policy of "whipped abstentions" (and discontent with Dion as leader) than from any genuine sense that the Liberals are apt substantially to increase their seat count. Nevertheless, the likelihood is that the voices of caution with the Liberal caucus will remain predominant for the time being, and that the Liberals will seek instead during the Commons' next sitting to showcase Rae and Hall

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Findlay's talents in advance of a possible fall election. Dion appeared to lean this way in a post-election press conference on March 18, noting that the caucus' first priority will be to hold the government accountable and to make sure that Parliament works effectively, while choosing the "right time" to trigger an election. For Dion personally, the addition of the new recruits -- particularly Rae -- to the Liberal front bench may prove to be a double edged sword if Rae's eloquence eclipses Dion in Question Period (not that many voters follow these televised exchanges very closely). As the Liberals' foreign policy critic, Rae likely will speak out forcefully on human rights in China and Afghanistan.

17. (C) Overall, the Conservatives are probably very comfortable with the outcome of the by-elections. They had only an outside chance at the Saskatchewan seat -- which they won -- and kept expectations low by insisting that the elections were the Liberals' to lose. They expended little effort or treasure. Their solid second showing in Vancouver may also show that they are beginning to make some inroads in key urban areas, a perennial weak point for the party. In contrast, the NDP -- which has been the loudest opposition voice in favor of an early federal election -- was effectively marginalized in the by-elections, fighting for third place with the upstart Green Party.

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